IN MYTH

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The Witiko: Algonkian Knowledge and Whiteman Knowledge

This article examines the nature of the Witiko, a cannibalistic, monstrous, manlike creature, widely reported in Algonkian myth, which is believed to possess certain individuals, causing them to behave in a hostile and violent manner. The author recounts academic interpretations of the phenomenon, including the prevalent explanation that it is a socially accepted and reinforced psychosis. He argues that the qualities attributed to the Witiko, or to the possessed person, are attitudes and actions experienced by persons in severe physical deprivation or psychological stress, and that the transfiguration of these qualities as a monstrous being is the Algonkian society's attempt to come to terms with radically antisocial behaviour.

The *Witiko* (sometimes spelled "Wendigo" or "Windigo") is a cannibalistic, monstrous person reported to have been encountered by Algonkian Indians in the northern forest; it is a phenomenon which has been interpreted in many different ways by students of Algonkian cultures. This paper examines the literature on Witiko to determine how these interpretations have varied as a result of internal changes in anthropology and in Algonkian cultures.

The Algonkians' views are usually embodied in narratives which range from recent and personally experienced events to mythic events.[1] The few Algonkian persons who have commented in a more critical fashion on the topic regard Witiko as either a mundane outcome of deprivation and despair or as the product of people's imaginations. These will be detailed and discussed in the latter half of this paper.

For some years anthropological reference to the Witiko has been in the context of a postulated Witiko psychosis. Viewing this practice critically, John Honigmann argues that interpretation by anthropologists of Witiko as delusion, thereby defining an Algonkian type of psychopathological disorder, is not acceptable "because the belief is fully supported by the community. The belief in transformation itself is not diagnostic of psychopathology."[2] Assessing Morton Teicher's compilation of seventy cases, Honigmann does

not find that any one of them consists of a "trustworthy observer's eyewitness report of a person who in his own words or by his own actions clearly admits to a compulsion to eat human flesh."[3]

We have made the diagnosis without seeing the patient, and so the case for Witiko remains to be made. Some kind of compulsion and transformation is believed in by Northern Algonkians, but their words are too often taken as literal (rather than imagic or symbolic) representations of events, which we then use to construct our definition of a Witiko psychopathology. We have also isolated Witiko from the context of other acts of cannibalism that do not appear to have included compulsion and from the context of other apparently problematical forms of loss of self-control.

In order to place the study of Witiko in its proper context, I will proceed first to a rough chronological sketch of writings about the Witiko from 1900 to 1977.

Earliest writers either ignore or resist ethnological interpretation. Algernon Blackwood's superb story of "The Wendigo" as essentially a terrifying experience presents the idea of horrible transformation without a translation of culture. That is, the author is not concerned with presenting Algonkian culture as distinct from our own, but rather with portraying emotions that are presumed pan-human.[4]

J. Emile Saindon, an Oblate priest, refers to the Algonkians among whom he lived as expressing "undisciplined imagination in fantastic vagaries . . . [which] block rational thought and judgement."[5] When told of a Cree woman who was becoming Witiko, he asks

> What was to be done? Her case had been explained to me in detail and I made up my mind to use all of this information if an opportunity presented. I went to visit her and observed her condition *without giving her a chance to describe her symptoms.* I made an analysis of her condition on my own account. I said to her with all the assurance of which I was capable: 'You are going to get well. I am certain of it, absolutely certain. Go to confession. Tomorrow receive Communion. Go out abroad as you used to do formerly.' The suggestion succeeded perfectly. [italics added][6]

Saindon's confidence in his understanding of the situation precluded his asking the woman how and what she felt; her account might have provided us with a great deal more knowledge than we have, perhaps comparable to the intriguing but confusing testimonies of the Moostoos case.[7]

Father Guinard obtained descriptions of Witiko from Tête-de-Boule in-

formants and set them in a rather melodramatic English translation. The Witiko, he says, are solitary, aggressive cannibals, naked but impervious to cold, with black skin covered by resin-glued sand. They have no lips, large crooked teeth, hissing breath, and big bloodshot eyes, something like owls' eyes. Their feet are more than two feet long, with long, pointed heels, and have only one big toe: "This is the way his tracks appear on sand and snow." Fingers and fingernails are "like the claws of the great mountain bears." The voice is strident, reverberating, and drawn-out into howls, and "his food was rotten wood, swamp moss, mushrooms, corpses, and human flesh."[8] Witiko has extraordinary strength and is invulnerable. He is a nocturnal hunter of men; when he is close, his heart beats twice as quickly as normal with joy, sounding like the drumming of a grouse. They can fly and also swim under water, making large waves to capsize canoes. They have foreknowledge of their victims' location.

CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS

The 1920's and 1930's saw a surge of interest in psychoanalytical implications for ethnological interpretation. John Cooper summarized his position in this way:

> A common psychosis among the eastern Cree and some kindred tribes shows two peculiar characteristics: the victim develops an "unnatural' craving for human flesh; he turns into an ice-hearted Witiko. The craving for human flesh appears pretty clearly to be derived *directly* from prevalent environmental and cultural conditions. The transformation into an ice-hearted Witiko seems to be derived indirectly, through the Witiko folk-lore concept, from the same conditions. [italics added][9]

These conditions are the environmental fact of periodic starvation and the cultural prohibition towards, and horror of, cannibalism. Within a few years of Cooper, Landes and Hallowell went more deeply into psychiatric explanations of the process of becoming Witiko. Ruth Landes gave a two-stage interpretation, in which the first stage is characterized by melancholia, inertia, brooding, and a desire to eat humans while being afraid to actually do so. Stage two is characterized by violent cannibalistic actions.[10] This seems logical, but we later find that only two cases out of the seventy reported by Teicher include both stages. A. Irving Hallowell offered a much more com-

plex psychoanalytical interpretation of a particular case. One has the sense that these scholars (and later ones) in treating of the Witiko, suspended their normal standards of critical and judicious interpretation, being for some reason drawn to make imaginative suggestions without a positive factual basis.

DIFFERENTIATION OF THE SYMBOLIC FROM THE LITERAL

In a 1951 paper Hallowell differentiates two categories of Witiko: "The first comprises actual persons who have turned into cannibals. . . . The second consists of mythical cannibal giants."[12] This initial differentiation of the reports about the phenomena was to have useful consequences.

SYNTHESIS OF THE DATA

Teicher, in 1960, drew together the available data into a major study, separating the materials into categories parallel to Hallowell's. He used thirty-one examples of folklore and case accounts of seventy persons reported to be Witiko. His interpretation is that ecological compulsion originally causes psychological compulsion, which then maintains itself and determines behaviour.[13] This rather unconvincing monocausal reasoning from environment to belief is repeated later by Bishop.[14] Sometimes Teicher seems to assume that Algonkian Indians, including those who are psychotic, are completely literal-minded. He is not alone in this.

THE PROBLEM OF OVERPOWERING THE DATA

To sum up the first half-century of explanations of the Witiko, it seems that we have taken an exotic notion out of its native context of the images of terror, and with much seriousness we have overinterpreted the meagre data. In this sense we have taken our interpretations more seriously than the phenomena we are trying to explain. For this reason it may be appropriate to indulge in taking our interpretations less seriously, for a moment at least, so the next section of this paper constitutes an opposition between satire and scholarship, mediated by hope and moderated by brevity.

I will quote first from the report of Dr. Rousseau, an ethnobotanist of the Noveau-Quebec region:

> I have known a windigo: he was my cook in the tundra. He made excellent bread, but I cared less for his meat sauces.[15]

Why are we so interested in a phenomenon for which the evidence is scant and for which the potential for further primary evidence is similarly modest? It is entirely reasonable in principle, for we are interested in many things (gods, spirits, souls, deep structures, and history, for example) with similar problems of evidence. But why the Witiko?

Are we erecting a myth of inhuman savagery in order to rationalize colonial dominance over "our" natives? Natives have long been defined as soulless beasts fit for the labour of colonial empire and perhaps for salvation. Cannibals have been particularly apt subjects for this colonialist interpretation. But this century has produced strong counter-interpretations, and we are now more likely to find self-castigation for introducing savage conditions to the native populations, whereby the Witiko, for instance, would be really Our Fault, instead of an indigenous beast. One consistently notable thing about our writings on the Witiko is that they rely heavily on the argumentative impact of drama.

WEAKNESSES IN MODELS OF WITIKO PSYCHOSIS

American anthropology in the 1960's put less confidence in psychoanalysis and more emphasis on model building. Raymond Fogelson developed a model to differentiate types of Witiko psychosis in order to make more coherent sense of the problem. He found his drama in emotional states of "insatiable craving" and "anti-social appetite,"[16] and although he thought that there were some "subtle psychological implications,"[17] I was unable to find any. Rather perversely, I have abstracted from his paper what can be found as the basis for a Psychological Theory of Witiko:

1. It occurs without starvation, as a group frenzy.
2. It occurs at the point of extreme starvation, as a solitary act.
3. One becomes Witiko through a vision quest, starvation, or sorcery.
4. It occurs only in men.
5. It occurs in women.
6. It is an evil spirit or possession by an evil spirit.
7. It is a human with a malevolent soul or a person who has lost humanity.
8. It is a transformation of being to a non-human order.
9. It is a mental disorder.

10. "Strangers become metamorphosed in her eyes into wild animals—wolves, bears, lynxes."[18]
11. "His family around him look like luscious beavers heavy with fat."[19]
12. He remains, solitary, in the bush.
13. They live in lodges, at some distance from the rest of the tribe.[20]
14. "They avoid him, and he lives among the savages like a timid head of game."[21]
15. These people are not molested, but rather are pitied.
16. It may be killed with an axe blow in the head.
17. It must be burned to ashes, to prevent regeneration.
18. Witiko belief is a case of Freudian displacement of aggression.
19. Witiko belief is a case of Freudian oral fixation.
20. The belief determines the behaviour.
21. The behaviour determines the belief.

It is not surprising that, faced with this range of variability, Fogelson decided to try to differentiate types of Witiko. What is surprising is that his first illustrative case of Witiko did not involve cannibalism in either ideas, motives, or acts. Therefore:

22. Witiko does not necessarily include aspects of cannibalism.

Clearly, the plot has thickened. Witiko is not necessarily a cannibal; he may be only a murderer of his fellows, urged on by dreams, melancholy, and brooding, in some sense bestial but possibly manifesting the desperate plight of the colonial oppressed.

AN ECOLOGICAL WITIKO

The early 1970's found optimism in the possibility of developing causal explanations or models from an empirical anchor in ecological variables. Charles Bishop argued for a dramatic rise in Witiko cannibalism in the 1800's caused by a dramatic increase in the incidence of starvation, which was, in turn, caused by a drop in the carrying capacity of the human ecology as a result of a dramatic increase in killing of large game to feed European colonial agents and Indian migrants into the northern Ontario fur trade.[22] This is only a superficially plausible explanation, since cannibalism may in some instances be caused by a single materialist aspect of starvation. But the Witiko phenomena constitute a more treacherous problem. We are not here faced with a simple task of filling empty stomachs, but rather with the elab-

oration of an implicitly symbolic system of belief. It is *implicitly* symbolic because what scholars might regard as symbolic phenomena (a psychotic episode of "insatiable craving" or a giant, hairy wild man in the bush, stalking human food), the Algonkian-speaking Indians regard as in some sense constituting real but transformed persons and events in the environment. Bishop could be ecologically correct,[23] but he is probably historically, culturally, and psychologically wrong. A major reason for this is that he fails to consider the ecology of *mind*.[24]

OUR PRECONCEPTIONS OF THE WILD MAN OF THE FOREST

When we read what others have written about the mind in relation to Witiko, we find some speculative excesses of "mentalism" that make me wonder how we can get ourselves into such a conceptual muddle. Perhaps our interest is a mixture of liberal guilt and the less self-aware motive of our colonial past atavistically urging us to *cherchez les bêtes*.

But I think that there is a more likely and more important sort of atavism to question in our motives. Are we simply finding the familiar in exotic settings? Ethnography, diffusion studies, and other work in the first half of this century have been characterized as a search for cultural inventories set in terms of our own traits, or at least our own categories and concepts. The Wild Man of the wilderness, often a hairy and solitary being who lurks just out of sight, is one of the oldest and most persistent folk beliefs in Western culture. Faced with a New World, and a New Wilderness, we might be expected to show considerable interest in a New Wild Man. We have certainly carried with us a traditional perception of primeval or virgin forest as embodying the opposition of nature to culture. The boreal forest winter is perceived as a continuous blast fraught with dangers, "a region so harsh in its natural aspects as to affright the sensibilities of some who feel its desolation, yet exerting an almost irresistible allurement upon the wandering instincts of others."[25] But we do not have good evidence that the Indians view it in this way, and we do have some strong suggestions to the contrary.[26] The separation of nature and culture and the notion of the forest as magically inimical to man are probably much more Western than Algonkian in origin, so we may chronically and uncritically find these familiar aspects in new forests, whether or not they are there for the Indians who occupy the area.

Why the fascination, which is of very great traditional depth, with eating people or with being eaten by people? I would like to rather uncautiously suggest two possible reasons. Robert Murphy suggests that Freud's impact was partly due to the fact that he hit a very sensitive spot in telling an an-

drocentric society that they were being eaten.[27] Further, we may wonder about a Western ethos expressed in the juxtaposition of consumer and consumed, not only in the business of getting a living, but also in love and friendship.

Not only are we likely to seek strangely familiar Wild Men in the bush, since this is a part of the traditional knowledge that we bring to the new situation; we are also following the dictates of our intellectual tradition of inquiry, testing existing knowledge (the familiar) against new data (the exotic settings). There is, in addition, an intellectualist trend in the past half-century, less intuitive and more analytical, less oriented towards phenomena and more concerned with logical parsimony. Fogelson's model-building is a case in point. Model-building may be in the form of algebraic equations or flow charts, structural taxonomies or cognitive frame-networks, or it may be more essayistic in its use, as with Freudian interpretations.

But to me, at least, models of Witiko are a retrograde step in approaching the problem. They are too facile, or have a superficial plausibility, because they are expressions of our own ecology of mind, too little a refraction of the phenomenal world of Algonkians. Or, to put it another way, they are too easy to be real. To give a final, satirical plunge into overinterpretation, I offer this desperate, schematic, psychiatric plot with a bit of structure thrown in for effect.

WITIKO AND "PSYCHIC UNITY"

The Witiko psychosis is an Algonkian re-enactment of Freud's primal parricide. Freud has told us that what began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group, and to the extent that the primal parricide is psychologically real, the lure of the Witiko for our psyche is simply our search for our lost, primal selves lurking just out of sight of society and waiting for an unguarded moment when they may snatch a recapitulation of the Oedipal *fête*. We imagine the Witiko, lost in space and time, in the boreal wilderness, waiting to grab the next hapless Algonkian that he can get his brutish hands on. Where has the Witiko come from? Why, he was from humans to begin with, but became separated, and liminal, and then. . . Ooops! Witiko has inverted the Turner-Gennep sequence and is reincorporating human society, victim by victim.

Freud's ghost should be smiling at the scene, to see old, repressive society being eaten by the young, primeval, natural man; Oedipus wins again. But the Indians lose again. The plot is absurd, if rationally plausible, and leaves us where this paper began, wondering why we write so much, and make such a mess, on a topic about which we know so little.

CURRENT PSYCHODYNAMIC VIEWS

Psychodynamic explanations have been taken much more seriously by several writers, among whom I have chosen the most recent major contributor, Thomas Hay. Hay takes the existence of the psychosis as given and finds that the dynamics compare closely to other kinds of cannibalism that are not psychotic (and not Eastern Subarctic) and to other kinds of psychoses in which cannibalistic impulses occur but are not acted upon.[28]

He assumes that Eastern Subarctic Algonkians have oral characters, which includes the necessity that those who desire to be cannibalistic "believe unconsciously that eating people is a means of magical efficacy for solving problems of interpersonal relations or for acquiring supernatural powers."[29] With regard to the problems of personal relations, cannibalism either stops the frustrations that another person imposes or preserves a threatened relationship by incorporating the other person. In both cases the cannibal is expressing in his actions the unconscious statement, "If you do not continue to offer me the gratifications on which I depend, I will gratify myself with you."

I would add here that one can push this sort of explanation further without much difficulty. For the Eastern Cree, at least, tradition holds that food-animals are in a loving relationship with humans unless there is a blunder by the hunter or interference by some other human.[30] If the hunter breaks down under the stress of deprivation of food-animals, then, in becoming Witiko, he can be said to use the psychodynamic mechanism of conversion reaction to develop a compulsive disorder that represses his love for his family and reinterprets them as his food. They must still love him, since they have made themselves available to be taken for food. This explanation is plausible, but of unknown validity.

Seymour Parker claims, and Hay repeats, that the desire to keep receiving dependency satisfactions may lead to aggression against a person who fails to provide the satisfactions.[31] My hypothetical interpretation above is only slightly more complex, involving a conversion from dependency on animals (and perhaps upon animal-masters) to those persons associated with other dependency emotions and frustration. These persons are involved in providing food but have not been the substance of the food. They are described by the Witiko as visually transformed into food-persons. But all of this rests upon the acceptance of both Witiko and these applications of psychodynamic theory as true to the Algonkian experience, which are two large assumptions.

Hay adds significant cultural factors: the importance of dreams and visions in defining the individual's world to him and the lack of alternative patterns for expressing cannibalistic desires. The social factors that are

important to the tendency to psychosis have to do with whether the group around the person includes people with confidence in their ability to cope with him and who have the capability to nurture the person out of his obsessive state with social force or with love.

Psychodynamic theory, then, extends the Western notion of *incorporation* from the simple act of taking food into the body to the metaphor-in-action of internalizing an emotionally important other person, in which the act of eating resolves a traumatic conflict and gives irreversible possession of the emotional relationships associated with the person who is eaten.

INCORPORATION AS SOCIAL METAPHOR

The notion of incorporation is taken even further in a recent paper by David Turner, who finds the narrative tradition regarding Witiko to be a metaphor for the logic of Algonkian social structure.[32] Social incorporation refers to the recruitment of persons into specific production groups (at the domestic, brotherhood, and band levels) posited by Turner, and myth is the code that reveals a structural isomorphy to the structure of social groups. This use of the structural theory and the metaphorically extended notion of incorporation highlights, in my opinion, our tendency to overpower a very poorly known Witiko phenomenon with our own intellectual creations. The problem of translating the Algonkian idiom of experience into terms that are understandable and worthwhile within our own tradition of urbane intellectual inquiry is poorly served by psychodynamic and structuralist theories, unless the effort includes the judicious use of Algonkian phenomena. Both Hay and Turner, in my opinion, have created intellectual monstrosities in imposing elegant arguments upon dubious data.

BACKGROUND AND DATA FOR NEW INTERPRETATIONS

Looking at the general interest shown by people in the man-and-beast relationship, James Fernandez has suggested that human beings feel the press of their own domestication, and that this feeling tends to bring out the beast in every man, causing him to relate in symbolically significant ways to beasts "out there" in the world.[33] Perhaps Fernandez has penetrated to a subtle motive in Western minds, but what about *Algonkian* minds? The Witiko problem remains a frustration; we think and read, and reflect, and yet cannot get ahold of it. We are subjectively drawn to the problem and then we back off into method at a distance from the bush, the feelings, the culture, the

phenomenal world of the Algonkians. What *is* back in the bush? What do we have in the way of positive knowledge?

1. Empirical knowledge:
a. People do sometimes go out of control in the bush when solitary or lost and become hysterical or amnesiac. I have first-hand knowledge of three cases, all temporary, although one was terminated by the person's death. Flight hysteria, described by Cooper,[34] seems to fit these cases.
b. Fearfulness of the mystery of some person being lost has psychological force for most Subarctic Indian people.
c. Acts of cannibalism were less common than we assume, but a concern about the possibility of cannibalism was relatively common.
2. Expressive knowledge: "Mythic monsters" (our terms are awkward) were commonly believed to be potentially "out there." There is:
a. complexity and variability in what is believed and by whom;
b. comparison to parallels in other cultures' monster beliefs;
c. a rich tradition of Witiko stories.

Interpretation of the evidence requires at least two approaches: we need sufficient self-awareness of our own symbolic system to be able to differentiate our subtle expectations from our appropriate interpretations of the Wild Man heritage, for which there is vast literature.[35] For example, Hayden White has argued that our notion of the beast within everyman is in all likelihood a transformation of the old notion of the Wild Man of the wilderness, more or less displaced, as the wilderness becomes known, to the interior of everyman. If White were correct, then Fernandez's idea of "the beast within" could be as much a Western historical artifact as the older Wild Man and must therefore be just as suspect as our basis for cross-cultural explanation. It is worth noting that this same notion of the beast within everyone of us as a powerful motive for our behaviour is the basis for Freudians, Jungians, and "other contemporary culture critics who, like Lévi-Strauss, lament the triumph of technology over civilised man and dream of the release of the lost child or the noble savage within us."[36]

The second approach is one that proceeds from a facility with the use of imagery in the expression of emotions. This ability is well developed in literary traditions. For instance, Blackwood's memorable account of "The Wendigo" is fictional, but it conveys our Western sense of the Witiko with astonishing accuracy, resonant emotion, and completeness. Blackwood's resources were his literate and imaginative mind and information given him by a friend who worked in the fur-trade in the Eastern Subarctic. One wonders what Blackwood might have been able to do if he had spent a longer period in the north as participant observer and had been familiar with the

ethnological writings on the area. This suggests that literate skills and a poetic mind could actually save us from mentalistic distortions if combined with a critical, comprehensive, ethnographic grasp of the evidence to be interpreted.

If we are not likely to get first-hand evidence, there is still plenty of secondary evidence to be obtained. Many Algonkians are both knowledgeable and interested in the topic, and their words may inform the problem significantly. Beyond this we have a vast collection of oral tradition that is already written down, relating directly to the Witiko and also relating indirectly, depicting notions of hardships, crisis, loss of control, starvation, metamorphosis, and other components of the symbolic system that contains Witiko.

Edward Ahenakew, a Cree who became a teacher and missionary, records an explanation by an old man named Weipust in which the extraordinary aspects are deliberately omitted and dismissed as untrue reports. Weipust's stark and spare image deserves full detail, so I quote Ahenakew's manuscript.

THE WE-TI-KOO or He-who-is-alone

> Wetikoo (Windigo in Salteaux) is a being which is of nebulous character in the minds of most people. Short story writers have fantastic ideas about him. Some think it is a kind of Indian devil, one describes it as being of prodigious size.
>
> The white man, who has not grown up with the Indians, cannot be blamed for his mistaken ideas, for most Indians he can converse with, are not capable of giving an elaborate explanation in English. Besides this, the Indians who can speak English, are usually the younger people and they themselves have a very hazy idea of the creature.
>
> Wetikoo is not a devil not a demon; he is not a spirit disembodied, nor is he of prodigious size. At one time in his life he was a human being born of human beings and perhaps quite normal for some years of his life.
>
> The reasons for a human being turning into a cannibal, i.e., Wetikoo, as given by the saner and more intelligent Indian men are these. I can do not better than to quote Old Weipust (Dirty-skin) a fine mannerly old man despite his name. I had asked him how Wetikoos came to be.
>
> > There is no doubt that Wetikoos existed in the old days. Frequently, specially in the forest parts of the country there may be a family living in a teepee, the man hunting for fur and incidentally killing

moose, deer and such for food. He might have an enemy somewhere. This man or woman—*mahokusu-mik*, i.e. curses him so that his luck leaves him, everything goes wrong, he can kill nothing, maybe the animals migrate to some other region.

He goes out to hunt every day, trying to feed his starving family and himself. Their plight becomes desperate. They are hungry and yet there is not a track, even of a rabbit anywhere within reach. Pangs of hunger cry aloud for food—a person will do almost anything to secure food.

As days of fasting go by; hope dies and despair takes its place. A time comes when one of the party begins to look longingly though slyly at another. This person is being sorely tempted to kill, so as to eat. It becomes an obsession with him or her. At last—chance offering, it happens. The person kills and soon he (or she) is eating. He has passed from being a human being to beastliness.

The rest of the family realizes that they have a Wetikoo to cope with. All that they have heard about such monsters comes into their minds. A great dread overwhelms them, the marrow inside the bones seems to melt and they have no power to move or fight. While they might have met ordinary dangers bravely, they were as frightened children in the presence of a powerful inhuman monster. They give in and very soon share the fate of the first victim.

Another reason why a person becomes a Wetikoo is due to his having in some way offended a spirit which may have befriended him in a dream and given him some powers. . . . This would bring a curse on him. This would not take away from him the gifts he had received but they would only be a curse to him and others instead of a blessing.

Then again an evil spirit may come to him in his dream. Probably nothing about the spirit would appear in his looks and actions to show that he was another, but what he pretends to be is a benevolent spirit. The Indian accepts the gifts accorded him only to find later on, that he was living under a curse and that nothing good would come out of his life. Such an Indian may also turn into a Wetikoo.

Such were the reasons why this monster appeared amongst people—fortunately, very rarely did the Wetikoo actually exist. I should say, that, in my opinion, the majority of the reports spread around that he had been seen were untrue—many such reports are brought about by some mischievous minded Indian trying to frighten someone else.

Such was the reply Weipust gave me. He had been a pagan till he

> attained midle-age, then he had adopted Christianity. He was learned in the things that pertained to old time Indian life. Knowledge handed down from the past was his. I accepted his words as of great value.
>
> To continue it is said that once a person has tasted human flesh he loses all human instincts he turns into a fierce carnivorous beast yearning to prey on his kind. He is gifted with supernatural powers and no one is able to withstand him except some person who is himself gifted with superior 'spirit help' and therefore more powerful. Such a person knows that he is so gifted and is willing to champion the cause of the band even at great personal risk.[37]

Weipust has described for us, in his example of starvation, the ordinary reality of Witiko from the point of view of one wise old man; many oral tradition and archival accounts confirm this pattern. Perhaps Weipust's skeptical attitude towards the more marvelous accounts is a result of his conversion to Christianity, but probably we should assume that he was also more critical than suggestible, aware of wrongness and wrong-headedness on the part of Indians as well as white men, when they are wondering about such terror-inspiring topics.

But for many people there must be more to Witiko than this, and it is from this point on that our problems gather momentum. In order to be brief, I will jump to an extreme case. In one narrative I collected a younger brother marries a beaver, and in the process of becoming transformed he is forced to begin to eat the meat of his killed and cooked wife. He becomes the "Great Beaver" and at the same time becomes *atoosh*, or Witiko, although there is no implication that he subsequently craved for the meat of beaver (or humans).[38] I have cited this case to show that when the gap is spanned between mundane cannibalism and mythic events and persons we are faced with a large and diffuse spread of evidence for beliefs, most of it encapsulated in the intuitions and actions of narratives.

I suggest that for many Algonkian Indians the notion of Witiko is very uncertain in both appearance and essence—that the possibility of Witiko's presence is accompanied by a wide variability in what Witiko may appear to be or the possibility that it is some other monster. Witiko is more certainly terrifying than he is a known figure with specifiable characteristics; in this regard he is roughly similar to our notion of the Christian Devil (a common English gloss for Witiko). As evidence for this hypothesis of ambiguity, I refer again to Ahenakew's paper, choosing a case where people are convinced they see Witiko, are terrified, and then discover that they were completely wrong.

Briefly, at about the turn of the century, one Christian Indian lived, and

ran a small store, on the Sturgeon Lake reserve. Rumours of a Witiko in the area began to build, and people took precautions, barring their windows. The man who was chief was seen to carry a rifle on his back while plowing. Then the people gathered to sleep together on the floor of the store. One night, a man reported seeing the Witiko standing on a high manure pile not far from the store. An old man started to sing a power song to blow the Witiko away. With the light of approaching dawn, the Christian Indian went out and saw that the figure on the manure pile was one of his calves. He called the people out, and a general laugh was the result. The old man stopped singing, looking very embarrased. People returned to their homes. The Christian Indian offers the concluding comment: "I confess, however, that I, even with my Christian beliefs, was not altogether free from fear."

The people shared the fear of an imminent Witiko and gathered for security; the old man sang for a spirit person's help. But when their shared perception was transformed by the recognition of a calf, the fear dissipated quickly, and the song and spiritual assistance were absurdly out of place. I have elsewhere described Eastern Cree songs and spiritual power with reasonable precision,[39] but the threat of Witiko and of other monstrous persons has not yielded into clarity, remaining instead quite diffuse and difficult to grasp. One reason may be that this is a subject on which people are more likely to be fearful than contemplative, and different categories of people may be quite differently fearful. For example, the narratives are used in various contexts to: scare children into staying close to the camp or house; scare children into being quiet at night, to go to sleep; excite children when they go to play the game of Witiko; inform people about the contingent nature of the world; scare adults into deference to some sorcerers; account for the disappearance of lost individuals; assert the appearance of monstrous persons; or convey deliberately imaginative contributions.

I am persuaded that a satisfactory understanding of Witiko and related notions will depend upon taking into account distinctions such as the above. I have examples of each of these categories in my collection of Cree narratives, but here I will only cite excerpts that describe Witiko's appearance. The following description is paraphrased from a narrative I collected in the field:

> [He] may be a human being to begin with, but, from eating human flesh, he changes. If this person ever comes across somebody, he would always kill them and eat them. They live all alone, in the bush, and are not normal. For instance, they would prefer to sit in the snow rather than on pine boughs, and they become very strong, but are not clever. Long ago, when there was no place to keep crazy people, they just

> lost them in the bush. While alone in the bush in a crazed condition, he was getting worse and worse. They used to eat anything that they see. And somebody saw where this man who was crazy was digging up people to eat them. He didn't keep himself clean, and his face was not nice to see. His clothes were all worn out, and his skin was all black. He just wouldn't look after himself at all. As they grow worse and worse, they get bigger and bigger.

The transformation process from crazed human person into a monstrous person is indicated in this statement. How and by whom the monster is actually perceived is indicated in the following statement:

> In the morning after they ate they crossed over to the sandy part of the beach. The person who had killed the atoosh [Witiko] (Peter Trapper) was sitting at the bow. He got off the canoe and *saw footprints which were twice the length of a man's foot.* The atoosh had been *barefooted.* The Atoosh's face was all brown, the same all over.[41]

He is perceived, then, by the conjuror who struggles against him, with a mode of perception that is not simply empiricist:

> Those who claim to have seen the Wetikoo say that he is a terrible looking creature; his hair is long and matted. Living like a wild beast, ever exposed to the elements, never washing himself, he has a face which brings horror to those who see him. He has the look of ever grinning as his lips are eaten away by himself as far as his teeth can reach. He uses as hair oil the feces of human beings and that partly explains the terrible odour which is said to be most noticeable when he is near.[41]

The odour, size, footprints, and other aspects of appearance and action parallel descriptions of the Sasquatch. Whether this is due to the occurrence of the Sasquatch in the Eastern Subarctic, to parallels in the symbolic experience of people with conjuring-like vision experiences all across the continent, or to diffusion of oral traditions across the Subarctic is an open question. We are most certain of diffusion of narratives.

Beyond narratives, actual Witiko scares are a part of the experience of many Northern Algonkians of middle age or older. These are often related

to the mystery and great concern over lost persons or may be a more complicated matter of group terror. But it is not only the Witiko that may be the threatening agency; it may be "white trappers" or other strangers or monsters. From one recorded version to another, some narratives replace Witiko with other creatures without altering many other aspects. Witiko is, when looked at in this synthetic fashion, more a matter of attitudes than he is a definable person.

The attitudes of the Indians would include the horror of being food for some monstrous person who has lost control of himself and become confused or transformed, irresponsibly powerful and damaging, sometimes as the result of the malign power of a sorcerer. People also have the attitude of confusion and paralytic fear of being beaten in this most horrible of life's contingencies. As Weipust describes it, some of Witiko's power is in the weakness of his victims.

Witiko's presumed attitude is one of low cunning in his desire to attack, kill, and eat those persons from whom he has become estranged, ostracized and solitary, exposed to the elements, and at once fearsome and fearful. He embodies the transformative power of despair, the awful confusion of family and society for food, and the consequent loss of humanity.

But these attitudes do not necessarily circumscribe a single, well-defined category of persons; there are other monstrous persons who share to some degree the motives and actions of Witiko and are regarded by people as being in some sense similar to him. Further, there are occasions when Witiko is not a transformed human, or not a cannibal, or not solitary, or not aggressive towards humans. There is more possibility and flexibility in the term than we have acknowledged.[42]

Yet many Algonkians and Algonkianists prefer to simplify this variance down to concrete kinds of person (monstrous, symbolic, or other) and condition. It is also manifestly clear that in either culture the experts do not agree. Apparently, while some Algonkians are prepared to accept the possibility of the monstrous, some Algonkianists prefer to tacitly assert the necessity of fantasy and then to exaggerate with false concreteness some aspects of symbolic implication that they have culled for this purpose from a variety of narratives.

In this context we have generalized a monster, not from a calf on a manure pile, but from similarly overwhelming our facts in a different manner. Evans-Pritchard, a judicious interpreter of such topics as belief and symbolism, reminds us that

> any event has the characters of uniqueness and generality, and . . . in an interpretation of it both have to be given consideration. If the speci-

> ficity of a fact is lost, the generalization about it becomes so general as to be valueless (this is what has happened to several of our categories, for example, 'tabu', 'totemism' and more recently 'lineage' . . .).[43]

I am arguing that the category of 'Witiko' has undergone such a devaluation.

To summarize, the Algonkian notion is a variable identification of separable attributes of attitude, appearance, and actions located on an event-specific basis in men, women, infants, cannibal monsters, solitary wild men, and a variety of less human-like creatures. We have over-generalized from some of these data a logically distinct category of persons or a distinct psychological condition. I concur with Honigmann and Ridington that, on the evidence, the case has not been made for Witiko belief and behaviour being diagnosed as a psychosis,[44] although particular aspects of Witiko may be components of some individuals' psychological dysfunction. Nor can he be realistically accepted as a category of persons, unless we can specify a category with boundaries allowing frequent realignment and with a content allowing great variance and transformative potential. Finally, from the Algonkian view there may be a category of madness that is identified as Witiko, a breakdown-transformation following despair, deprivation, and an enemy's curse. But the Witiko psychosis in the literature is not a very adequate approximation to the Algonkian emotional dynamics or to the great variability in Algonkian oral tradition on this topic.

Weipust's account suggests to me a human who, as the result of a curse by human or spiritual enemy, is blinded by deprivation and despair and may thereby be driven into the madness of Witiko. Since his competence proves continuously ineffective in relation to his environment, he cannot eat food-animal-persons to live as humans must. His mental competence weakens to the point of abandoning spiritual relationships and, in his internal experience, it weakens to the point of perceiving his family as food. He then loses control of social competence, attacks, kills, and eats his family. His attack and threatening behaviour are certainly definable as damaging, and the paralysis of fear that affects the survivors shows that some of his power is in the weakness of his victims. But this specific context of cannibalism does rather little to explain or understand the rest of Witiko belief, the differences between human persons and Witiko persons, or the consequences for social organization or human community. And since Witiko refers mostly to an imputed or imagined quality of mind, embodied in extraordinary action and only reflected in appearances, the concept of damaging madness becomes awkward for understanding not merely the empirical events but also the human significance of the events. I suggest that Witiko madness may be imagined by some Algonkians as possible to resolve by transformation into the domain of what we call mythic persons. In this domain, Witiko is beyond

madness and is better understood in terms of his transformed competencies.

Since the data are diverse and imaginative, by most standards ephemeral a critical question is how we can make coherent sense out of the corpus of data that will make "mythic" Witiko understandable in non-exotic terms.

I will briefly describe the defining characteristics of Witiko competence, separated for convenience into the aspects of technical, social, and mental competence.[45]

In technical competence, Witiko has the ability to withstand unprotected exposure to the physical environment and is able to find food without the singular, distinguishing advantage of humans, to whom food-animals give themselves willingly. In this respect Witiko is directly comparable to other non-human carnivores whose food is unwilling. Most, perhaps all, large carnivores are sometimes cannibalistic. Also comparable are owls (for which some Algonkian languages use a root meaning cannibal),[46] dogs, and other creatures who occasionally fight, kill, and eat members of their own species.

With respect to social competence, Witiko has the ability to withstand isolation and ostracism and to be shunned, feared, and perhaps killed by humans. Witiko is also able to find and catch food without the necessity of sharing in time of hardship, again comparable to non-human carnivores.

Concerning mental competence, Witiko is responsive to the directing influence of some conjurors and is unwilling to eat the meat of non-humans. He perceives humans as food-persons, which is opposed to the fundamental and necessary human faith that they are not.

The competencies of a Witiko person are aspects of beastliness, clearly very different from the competence of a human person in an Indian community. But the difference is not defined by the madness relations that exist so much as it is defined by the recognition that Witiko, while powerful and threatening to humans, is fundamentally another kind of creature with correspondingly different characteristics of competence. Witiko is a human transformed into a beast not only because he has dominated and eaten his family, but also because he lives on—with the kinds of competencies that are characteristic of non-human carnivores.

Notes

1. See my *Cree Narrative: Expressing the Personal Meanings of Events*, National Museum of Man, Canadian Ethnology Service, Mercury Series no. 30 (Ottawa, 1975).

2. John H. Honigmann, *Culture and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 380.
3. Honigmann, *Personality in Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 401.
4. In Algernon Blackwood, *The Lost Valley and Other Stories* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1910).
5. J. Emile Saindon, "Mental Disorders among the James Bay Cree," *Primitive Man* 6 (1933): 1–12.
6. Ibid., pp. 11–12.
7. See Morton I. Teicher, "Windigo Psychosis," in *Proceedings of the 1960 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. V.F. Ray [n. p.], 1960), pp. 93–103.
8. Joseph E. Guinard, "Witiko among the Tête-de-Boule," *Primitive Man* 3 (1930): 70.
9. John M. Cooper, "The Cree Witiko Psychosis," *Primitive Man* 6 (1933): 24.
10. Ruth Landes, "The Abnormal among the Ojibwa Indians," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 33 (1938): 14–33.
11. A. Irving Hallowell, "Psychic Stresses and Culture Patterns," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 42 (1936): 1291–1310.
12. Hallowell, "Cultural Factors in the Structuralization of Perception," in *Social Psychology at the Cross Roads* (New York: Harper, 1951), p. 182.
13. Teicher, "Windigo Psychosis."
14. Charles A. Bishop, "Ojibwa Cannibalism," Ninth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (Chicago: [n. p.] 1973).
15. Quoted in Teicher, "Windigo Psychosis," p. 80.
16. Raymond Fogelson, "Psychological Theories of Windigo 'Psychosis', and a Preliminary Application of a Models Approach," in *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. M.E. Spiro (New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 77.
17. Ibid., p. 78.
18. Saindon, "Mental Disorders," p. 11.
19. Landes, "Abnormal among the Ojibwa," p. 25.
20. Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1859), pp. 60–61.
21. J.G. Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Wanderings around Lake Superior* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), p. 356.
22. Bishop, "Ojibwa Cannibalism."
23. Although Leo Waisberg, "Boreal Forest Subsistence and the Windigo: Fluctuations of Animal Populations," *Anthropologica*, n.s. 17 (1975): 169–85, provides a contrary argument.
24. For a definition of this concept, see Gregory Bateson, *Steps Towards Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).
25. F.G. Speck, *Naskapi: the Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), p. 33.
26. See my "Cree Narrative," chapters 5 and 8.
27. Robert F. Murphy, *The Dialectics of Social Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 10.
28. Thomas H. Hay, "The Windigo Psychosis: Psychodynamic, Cultural, and Social Factors in Aberrant Behavior," *American Anthropologist* 73 (1971): 1–19.
29. Ibid., p. 3.
30. See my "Cree Narrative."
31. Seymour Parker, "The Witiko Psychosis in the Context of Ojibwa Personality and Culture," *American Anthropologist* 62 (1960): 603–23.
32. D.H. Turner, "Windigo Mythology and the Analysis of Cree Social Structure," *Anthropologica*, n.s. 19 (1977): 63–73.
33. James Fernandez, "Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Everybody . . . and the Metaphors of Everyman," in *Myth, Symbol and Culture*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), pp. 39–60.
34. Cooper, "Cree Witiko Psychosis."
35. For a comprehensive survey of this tradition, see Edward Dudley and M.E. Novak,

eds., *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972).

36. Hayden White, "The Forms of Wilderness: Archeology of an Idea," in ibid., pp. 3–88.
37. Edward Ahenakew, "The We-ti-koo, or He-who-is-alone," manuscript account dated April, 1949, in the archives of the American Philosophical Society, Franz Boas Collection of American Indian Linguistics, no. 67.
38. The word 'Atoosh' refers to the Witigo in the vocabulary of the Crees of the east coast of James Bay, Quebec. The 'Atoosh' quality of the Great Beaver was recorded at Rupert House, James Bay, by Brian Craik, from John Blackned (personal communication).
39. 'Cree Narrative."
40. Ibid. p. 114.
41. Ahenakew, "We-ti-koo."
42. The flexibility of meaning for the word Witiko bears comparison with the Old World category '*Eotenas*' (see D.L. Jeffrey's paper in this volume).
43. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 175.
44. Honigman, *Culture and Personality*, pp. 279–82, *Personality in Culture*, pp. 399–403, and Robin Ridington, "Wechuge and Windigo: A Comparison of Cannibal Belief among Boreal Forest Athapaskans and Algonkians," *Anthropologica*, n.s. 18 (1976): 107–29.
45. The concept of competence is applied to Eastern Cree culture and discussed in terms of the ideals of technical, social, and mental culture of adult men, in my "Reticence and Self-Expression: A Study of Style in Social Relationships," in *Papers of the Seventh Algonquian Conference, 1975*, ed. William Cowan (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1976), pp. 450–94. A general survey of the concept in psychology is given in M. Brewster Smith, "Competence and Socialization," in *Socialization and Society*, ed. J. Clausen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), pp. 270–320.
46. See, for example, Ives Goddard, "Owl and Cannibal," paper read at the 3rd Conference on Algonquian Studies, St. John's, Nfld., 1971.

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